

Developing Questions for Literature Discussion

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In their article about authentic questions (*Language Arts*, September 1995), Beverly Bushing and Betty Ann Slesinger wisely remind teachers that "Whether a question is about facts or concepts is less important than whether a question is a part of something significant" (344). Still, when developing questions to support students in a literary discussion, it is helpful to think of questions in three categories: **factual**, **interpretive**, and **evaluative**.

Factual questions have only one correct answer based on the text. While these questions typically don't form the basis for a literary discussion, posing them is often necessary to help students clarify facts and sort through details.

Interpretive questions have more than one correct answer based on the text. These questions often begin with the words "How" ("How does Luke feel about his brothers in *Among the Hidden*?") or "Why" ("Why does Luke worry about being discovered?").

Evaluative questions are those in which a student's response is based on values or a choice of action in a similar situation ("If you were Luke, would you have gone outside to play if you thought nobody was around?" or "If you were never allowed to go outside again for the rest of your life, how would you feel?").

Many experienced discussion leaders like to begin with interpretive questions because they afford the opportunity for a number of possible "good" answers. Because such questions are necessarily thought-provoking, students are often given the opportunity to jot down a brief answer before discussion begins.

Teachers may find it useful to ask follow-up questions to keep discussion moving. Asking for clarification ("What do you mean by that?" or "Can you say that in different words?" or "Could you explain that a little more?") models the value of developed explanations. Suggesting that students substantiate their comments ("Where do you see that in the story?" or "What evidence do you have to support that?") helps them learn the value of looking to the text for information. Asking for another opinion ("Do you agree with that?" or "Does that make sense to the rest of you?") can be an effective strategy when an issue or an understanding is controversial.

Material from the *Conversations in Literature* Web site (www.learner.org/envisioningliterature) can provide further support as you develop effective questions for literature discussion. See the sample discussion questions there.